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Remarks on Immigration Reform

May 16, 2019

Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you. Please. Thank you. Thank you very much.

We're here on this very beautiful spring day in the Rose Garden to unveil our plan to create a fair, modern, and lawful system of immigration for the United States. And it's about time.

If adopted, our plan will transform America's immigration system into the pride of our Nation and the envy of the modern world. Our proposal builds upon our Nation's rich history of immigration, while strengthening the bonds of citizenship that bind us together as a national family.

Throughout our history, we have proudly welcomed newcomers to our shores. Out of many people, from many places, we have forged one people and one Nation under God, and we're very proud of it. We share the same home, we share the same destiny, and we pledge allegiance to the same, great American flag.

Our policies have turbocharged our economy. Now, we must implement an immigration system that will allow our citizens to prosper for generations to come. Today we are presenting a clear contrast: Democrats are proposing open borders, lower wages, and frankly, lawless chaos. We are proposing an immigration plan that puts the jobs, wages, and safety of American workers first. Our proposal is pro-American, proimmigrant, and proworker. It's just common sense. It will help all of our people, including millions of devoted immigrants, to achieve the American Dream.

We are grateful to be joined this afternoon by a tremendous number of people from the House, the Senate, and my Cabinet. And I love you all, but I won't introduce you all because I'll be here all day long. [*Laughter*] But you're all here.

Our plan achieves two critical goals. First, it stops illegal immigration and fully secures the border. And second, it establishes a new legal immigration system that protects American wages, promotes American values, and attracts the best and brightest from all around the world. The proposal begins with the most complete and effective border security package ever assembled by our country or any other country, for that matter. It's so important.

This plan was not developed, I'm sorry to say, by politicians. We have a lot of politicians. But you respect the people and you know the people that have developed this plan. It was designed with significant input from our great law enforcement professionals to detail what they need to make our border, which is 100 percent operationally secure. One hundred percent.

Everyone agrees that the physical infrastructure on the border and the ports of entry is gravely underfunded and woefully inadequate. We scan only a small fraction of the vehicles, goods, and all of the other things coming across, including people. And sadly, the drugs pour across our border. We're going to stop it.

Investment in technology will ensure we can scan 100 percent of everything coming through, curbing the flow of drugs and contraband, while speeding up legal trade and commerce. It's the most heavily traded—monetarily—border anywhere in the world, and it's

not even close. To make certain that we are constantly making the upgrades we need, our proposal creates a permanent and self-sustaining border security trust fund. This will be financed by the fees and revenues generated at the border crossings itself.

Importantly, we're already building the wall, and we should have close to 400 miles built by the end of next year and probably even more than that. It's going up very rapidly. And I want to thank the Army Corps of Engineers. They're doing a fantastic job on the wall. And that's a wall that is desperately needed.

As we close the gaps in our physical framework, we must also close the gaps in our legal framework. Critical to ending the border crisis is removing all incentives for smuggling women and children. Current law—[*applause*]. That's right. That's right, women and children. People have no idea how bad it is unless you're there and unless you are a member of law enforcement. They see it every day, and they can't believe what they see.

Current law and Federal court rulings encourage criminal organizations to smuggle children across the border. The tragic result is that 65 percent of all border crossers this year were either minors or adults traveling with minors. Our plan will change the law to stop the flood of child smuggling and to humanely reunite unaccompanied children with their families back home and rapidly, soon as possible.

We must also restore the integrity of our broken asylum system. Our Nation has a proud history of affording protection to those fleeing government persecutions. Unfortunately, legitimate asylum seekers are being displaced by those lodging frivolous claims—these are frivolous claims—to gain admission into our country.

Asylum abuse also strains our public school systems, our hospitals, and local shelters, using funds that we should—and that have to—go to elderly veterans, at-risk youth, Americans in poverty, and those in genuine need of protection. We're using the funds that should be going to them. And that shouldn't happen. And it's not going to happen in a very short period of time. Have to get this approved.

My plan expedites relief for legitimate asylum seekers by screening out the meritless claims. If you have a proper claim, you will quickly be admitted; if you don't, you will promptly be returned home.

Crucially, our plan closes loopholes in Federal law to make clear that gang members and criminals are inadmissible. These are some of the worst people anywhere in the world, MS–13 and others. Inadmissible. Not coming in. We're taking them out all the time by the thousands, a year, but they come in. They are no longer admissible. And for criminals already here, we will ensure their swift deportation. We will keep our communities safe. Americans can have complete and total confidence that under this plan, the borders will finally be fully and totally secured.

And I know a number of our Republican friends and others—Lindsey, I see you sitting right there, and Steve, you're working on a plan—an immediate plan. A smaller plan, but a very immediate plan to stop it as of this afternoon, so as fast as you can get something done. This is the big, beautiful, bold plan, but we need something very quickly. And if you can get it done, that would be fantastic. Okay? Thank you. Appreciate you working on it.

A topic of less discussion in national media, but of vital importance to our country, is our legal immigration system itself. Our plan includes a sweeping modernization of our

dysfunctional legal immigration process. It is totally dysfunctional. The system will finally be fair, transparent, and promote equality and opportunity for all.

Every year, we admit 1.1 million immigrants as permanent legal residents. These green card holders get lifetime authorization to live and work here and a 5-year path to American citizenship. This is the most prized citizenship anywhere in the world, by far.

Currently, 66 percent of legal immigrants come here on the basis of random chance. They're admitted solely because they have a relative in the United States. And it doesn't really matter who that relative is. Another 21 percent of immigrants are issued either by random lottery or because they are fortunate enough to be selected for humanitarian relief.

Random selection is contrary to American values and blocks out many qualified potential immigrants from around the world who have much to contribute. While countless—and you wouldn't believe how many—countries, like Canada, create a clear path for top talent, America does not.

Under the senseless rules of the current system, we're not able to give preference to a doctor, a researcher, a student who graduated number one in his class from the finest colleges in the world—anybody. We're not able to take care of it. We're not able to make those incredible breakthroughs. If somebody graduates top of their class from the best college, sorry, go back to your country. We want to keep them here.

Companies are moving offices to other countries because our immigration rules prevent them from retaining highly skilled and even, if I might, totally brilliant people. We discriminate against genius. We discriminate against brilliance. We won't anymore, once we get this passed. And we hope to get it passed as soon as possible.

Some of the most skilled students at our world-class universities are going back home because they have no relatives to sponsor them here in the United States. And that's the only way. We want these exceptional students and workers to stay, and flourish, and thrive in America. [*Applause*] Thank you.

As a result of our broken rules, the annual green card flow is mostly low wage and low skilled. Newcomers compete for jobs against the most vulnerable Americans and put pressure on our social safety net and generous welfare programs.

Only 12 percent of legal immigrants are selected based on skill or based on merit. In countries like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—and others—that number is closer to 60 and even 70 and 75 percent, in some cases. The biggest change we make is to increase the proportion of highly skilled immigration from 12 percent to 57 percent, and we'd like to even see if we can go higher. This will bring us in line with other countries and make us globally competitive.

At the same time, we prioritize the immediate family of new Americans, spouses and children. The loved ones you choose to build a life with, we prioritize. And we have to do that. They go right to the front of the line—right to the front of the line—where they should be.

America's last major overhaul of our legal admissions policy was 54 years ago. Think of that. So a major update—and that's what this is, merit system and a heart system—is long overdue. The millions of legal immigrants who have come to America over the past half-century are now cherished members of our national family. Going forward, it is their interest—and in their interest, and their children's interest, to adopt a green card system that promotes a rising standard of living for all of our citizens.

Three in four new jobs at the end of last year went to Americans previously out of the workforce. Our economy is better probably than it ever has been in the history of our country. And because of that great economy, we're able to do things that nobody ever thought possible before, and that's what we're going to do for immigration, finally.

Wages are rising, but our current immigration system works at cross-purposes, placing downward pressure on wages for the working class, which is what we don't want to do.

Last year, we also passed historic criminal justice reform. And we had tremendous backing—bipartisan—from Democrats, Republicans, conservatives, liberals. I guess we could also use the word "progressives." [*Laughter*] A new word that's come about.

Americans with criminal records are getting a second chance at life in higher numbers than ever before. Unfortunately, the current immigration rules allow foreign workers to substitute for Americans seeking entry-level jobs. So foreign workers are coming in, and they're taking the jobs that would normally go to American workers. America's immigration system should bring in people who will expand opportunity for striving, low-income Americans, not to compete with those low-income Americans.

Our proposal fulfills our sacred duty to those living here today, while ensuring America remains a welcoming country to immigrants joining us tomorrow. And we want immigrants coming in. We cherish the open door that we want to create for our country, but a big proportion of those immigrants must come in through merit and skill.

The White House plan makes no change to the number of green cards allocated each year. But instead of admitting people through random chance, we will establish simple, universal criteria for admission to the United States. No matter where in the world you're born, no matter who your relatives are, if you want to become an American citizen, it will be clear exactly what standard we ask you to achieve. It will be made crystal clear.

This will increase the diversity of immigration flows into our country. We will replace the existing green card categories with a new visa, the Build America visa, which is what we all want to hear. Like Canada and so many other modern countries, we create an easy-to-navigate points-based selection system. You will get more points for being a younger worker, meaning you will contribute more to our social safety net. You will get more points for having a valuable skill, an offer of employment, an advanced education, or a plan to create jobs.

We lose people that want to start companies, and in many cases, they're forced to leave our country, go back, usually, to the country where they came from, and they'll start up companies, and some of those companies are among the biggest and most successful companies today in the world. They could've started them right here in the United States, where they wanted to do it in the first place. Now they'll have a chance.

Priority will also be given to higher wage workers, ensuring we never undercut American labor. To protect benefits for American citizens, immigrants must be financially self-sufficient.

Finally, to promote integration, assimilation, and national unity, future immigrants will be required to learn English and to pass a civics exam prior to admission.

Through these steps, we will deliver an immigration system that respects, and even strengthens, our culture, our traditions, and our values. Four months ago, I had the honor of participating in a swearing-in ceremony for new Americans, right here in the Oval Office. It was a beautiful reminder that American citizenship is the most precious gift our Nation has to

offer. When we swear in new citizens, we do more than give them a permit, we give them a history, a heritage, a home, and a future of limitless possibilities and potential.

Our Nation used to pride ourselves on this capacity: our unique ability to instill the spirit of America into any human heart, into any human being. Many of the Democrats have claimed to be for these concepts at different times in their careers and, in many cases, in very recent history. And I hope that they will end up joining me and all of the people gathered together today in putting politics aside, putting security and wages first, and pursuing these historic reforms. It's time.

And if for some reason—possibly political—we can't get the Democrats to approve this merit-based, high-security plan, then we will get it approved immediately after the election, when we take back the House, keep the Senate, and of course, hold the Presidency. [*Applause*] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much.

But wouldn't it be nice to do it sooner than that? [*Laughter*] But it's not a very long time, is it? Sixteen months.

One of the reasons we will win is because of our strong, fair, and pro-America immigration policy. It's time to restore our national unity and reaffirm our national purpose. It is time to rebuild our country for all Americans. Together, we will create an immigration system to make America safer and stronger and greater than ever before.

Thank you. God bless you all. Thank you very much. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:35 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Sen. Lindsey O. Graham; and Rep. Stephen J. Scalise.

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